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Theology, Phenomenology, and the Divine in King Lear

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Of Levinas and Shakespeare: "To See Another Thus"

Edited by

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with

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4: Theology, Phenomenology, and the Divine in *King Lear*

Kent R. Lehnhof

[M]etaphysics is enacted where the social relation is enacted—in our relations with men. There can be no “knowledge” of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. He does not play the role of a mediator. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely in his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. It is our relations with men . . . that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of.

—Levinas (TI 78-79)

Those who have asserted the piety of *King Lear* have typically done so by matching up the play's rhythms and resonances with those of Christian myth. Geoffrey Bickersteth, for instance, believes that the man who wrote *Lear* was “unconsciously inspired” by the central story of Christianity. R. W. Chambers sees the play as carrying us through *Purgatorio* and into *Paradiso*, and Edgar Fripp concurs, calling *Lear* “the noblest spiritual utterance since *La Divina Commedia*.”¹ In redemptive readings such as these, Cordelia is customarily cast in the role of Christ. She is the divine agent of grace whose gift of love culminates in what Paul Siegel terms “the miracle”:

This miracle is the redemption of Lear for heaven, a redemption analogous to the redemption of mankind, for which the Son of God had come down to earth. The analogy between Cordelia and Christ, who redeemed nature from the curse brought on it by Adam and Eve, is made unmistakable, although not crudely explicit.²

Though William Elton and others have done much to discredit pious approaches to Shakespeare's play, it is difficult to reject outright a religious reading of *Lear*, inasmuch as several of its passages seem intent on casting Cordelia in a divine light.³ Cordelia is said to shake "holy water from her heavenly eyes" (Q 17.31).⁴ She is compared to a "soul in bliss" (4.6.39). She is described as the one "who redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to" (4.5.196-97). And she is made to speak the words of the biblical Jesus, echoing his "know ye not that I must go about my fathers business?" (Lk. 2:49) in her "O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about" (4.3.23-24).⁵ Though passages such as these do not necessarily make the play "religious," there can be no doubt—as Richard Strier observes—that "positive religious language certainly accretes, non-ironically and non-ambiguously, around the character of Cordelia."⁶

Yet Strier is also correct to question how much metaphysical weight is borne by all this religious language. When Jesus refers himself to his father's business, he does so to reject the claims of his mortal parents and assert the primacy of his otherworldly allegiances. When Cordelia uses the phrase, her meaning is quite different. The business to which she pledges herself does not belong to her father in heaven but to her literal, flesh-and-blood parent. And so it is with the other moments in the play. Time and again, religious imagery and language confer upon Cordelia a form of piety, yet this piety does not imply or entail any direct connection with the divine. "[T]here is no transcendental dimension to it," Strier writes.⁷ According to Strier, this anti-transcendence is evidence of Shakespeare's interest in secularizing the sacred doctrines of Christianity. As he sees it, Shakespeare is trying to strip divine love and godly mercy of their transcendental guarantees so as to find and fully imagine their human equivalents. In Cordelia's case, this results in a character that resembles Christ—not because she is a type or analogue of him—but because she models what "Christ-likeness" could or would look like in a world without God.

Although I find Strier's interpretation intriguing, I am hesitant to accede to his assertion that there is no transcendental dimension to Cordelia's devotion, for it quite clearly suggests something of the sort to a great many of us. It is no accident that G. Wilson Knight

repeatedly uses the word "transcendent" when talking about Cordelia (no fewer than five times in the span of two and a half pages!).⁸ There is something about her character and comportment that persistently puts us in mind of the beyond. This beyond may not be the beyond of the Christian afterlife or a Protestant heaven, but it bears no small resemblance to the "beyond Being" that Emmanuel Levinas associates with true transcendence. In what follows, then, I would like to think through Levinas's ideas on transcendence and ethics in such a way as to map out a new pathway for approaching Shakespeare's great tragedy. As unorthodox as it may sound, I propose to shed light on the darkling religiosity of *King Lear* by turning—not to the theological doctrines of early modern Christians—but to the postmodern ethics of a twentieth-century Jew.⁹

Such a move is prepared for, at least in part, by the pious qualities of Levinas's thought, which he made no effort to conceal. "One often speaks of ethics to describe what I do," Levinas once remarked, "but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy."¹⁰ For some, Levinas's metaphysical investments are anathema. Alain Badiou, for example, has complained that Levinas's ethical philosophy is a kind of "decomposed religion" (*religion décomposée*) and has argued that it ought to be disregarded as such.¹¹ Atheistic objections, however, did not trouble Levinas too much. As he told Philippe Nemo, "I am not afraid of the word God" (EI 105). Levinas's confidence comes from his conviction that God is a phenomenological given. In professing this, though, Levinas does not presume that God discloses Himself directly in this world. Quite the contrary, Levinas insists that God cannot be contained within a human reality or mortal present. Existing out of time, immemorially, Levinas's God is utterly asynchronous with humanity. But if God is not imminent, He is nevertheless manifest—and what makes Him manifest is the face of the other person (*autrui*). "The dimension of the divine," Levinas writes, "opens forth from the human face . . . It is here that the Transcendent, infinitely other, solicits us and appeals to us" (TI 78).

To understand how this should be so, we must consider the signifyingness of the face. As Levinas explains it, the first word of the face is a command: the "thou shalt not kill." Paradoxically, what gives this command its power is the poverty of the other. According

to Levinas, the human face is so destitute, exposed, and menaced, that it arrests all egoism. In the face of the other, the "I" experiences the full force of what Levinas calls "the resistance of what has no resistance," and the immediate effect of this resistance is to command me, as a master commands, to take responsibility for the other" (TI 199). The nudity and neediness of the face requires of me that I not merely *be* but *be-otherwise*, or *be-for-the-other*.

While it might seem axiomatic to suppose that my face must command the other just as her face commands me, Levinas is emphatic that interrelation cannot be experienced from the outside, as a symmetry or reciprocity. It can only be experienced from the inside, where the only thing to be seen is one's own obligation. The "I" is never on equal footing with the other, which is what Levinas means when he says that the face of the other speaks from an insuperable "height" or "elevation." However, this elevation is the very thing that gives us our first glimpse of God. By commanding me from on high, the other puts me in mind of The Most High. Or, as Levinas phrases it, the ethical height of *autrui* is "the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed" (TI 79).

In addition, *autrui* also discloses the divine in her absolute alterity and in the unending obligation to which she ordains me. By perpetually exceeding my totality and by imposing on me an obligation that never ends, the other supplies me with the idea of infinity, hence, of The Infinite. As a consequence, Levinas commonly uses religious terminology to talk about interrelation. For Levinas, the encounter with the other is an "epiphany," a "visitation," and a "revelation," and the approach to the other is both an "invocation" and a "prayer." Indeed, Levinas upholds as the most ethical response to the other the response Old Testament prophets give upon hearing the voice of God (EI 97).¹² This is not because the other is God but because the other is His "disincarnation." *Autrui*, as Levinas says, is found "in the trace of God," obliquely expressing Him in her elevation, alterity, infinitude, and authority.

All this might seem an overly complex or roundabout way of addressing Shakespeare's tragedy, but I believe that Levinas's notion of "disincarnation" can discover a great deal in the play's numinous treatment of Cordelia. When Levinas teaches that the other bears "the trace of God," does this not ring true of Cordelia? (BPW 64).

Like Levinas's other, does she not signify the Altogether Other in a non-systematic and non-synthesizable way? Is it not suggestive to say of Lear's daughter what Levinas says of *autrui*: that she puts us in mind of God, not because she allegorically or typologically figures him, but because she "disincarnates" him in her alterity and in the ethical height from which she speaks? In posing such questions, what I want to suggest is that Cordelia figures into Shakespeare's play much as the other figures into Levinas's philosophy. She is the one whose imperiled alterity arrests our egoism and ordains us to an exhausting ethical responsiveness. She is the one whose ethical height overawes us and puts us in mind of the divine. She is the one through whom the Transcendent speaks, summons, and solicits.

If we look at Cordelia through a Levinasian lens, we soon see that she is characterized by nothing so much as her exposedness and her alterity. The young girl who takes the stage in act one is both vulnerable and menaced; nevertheless, she effectively resists reduction or assimilation. Cordelia cannot be bent to her father's will—or to ours, for that matter. A quick survey of the critical literature shows that we do not know what we are supposed to make of her behavior at the beginning of the play ("Nothing," indeed!), nor do we know what we are supposed to see in her face at the end of the play ("Do you see this? Look on her!" (5.3.311)). From start to finish, in life and in death, Cordelia is an enigma, exceeding our grasp at every moment. Her otherness is a theatrical construct—at least in part—but it appeals to us nonetheless. We feel the dimension of the divine opening up around her, even if it does not conform to our ready-made theological concepts. For Levinas, this non-conformity is apropos, inasmuch as neither God nor the other is amenable to adequation or thematization. Both are infinite, irreducible—which is why the encounter with *autrui* (or in this case, Cordelia) is shot through with the traces of God.

To entertain such thoughts is to give welcome to my basic premise, which is this: that ethical phenomenology can give us better purchase on the irregular spiritual textures of *King Lear* than either religious allegory or Christian typology. This is because Shakespeare's play—at least as I read it—is less interested in enacting *a priori* theological precepts than in exploring what it is like to be confronted by one who is irreducibly other. To be sure, this is the moment to which

the play keeps returning: that astonishing instant in which one character is made to realize that another character is both unknown and unknowable.¹³ Again and again, individuals in this play (Lear being chief among them) are compelled to contemplate one who is revealed to be utterly foreign—even when she is the favorite daughter. Encounters with alterity are the substance of this play, just as they are the substance of Levinas's philosophy. But if both authors present the interpersonal encounter as crucial, neither is under any illusion that it is comfortable, which is why Levinas talks of it as a "trauma" or a "wound" and why Shakespeare makes of it the matter of tragedy. Interrelation may put us on the path to transcendence, but it does so painfully, by overthrowing and overburdening us. As Levinas says, the face-to-face dethrones or deposes the sovereign ego, thrusts it into a distressed and difficult realm of relation, and afflicts it with an obligation it can neither fulfill nor flee (EI 52).¹⁴

To my way of thinking, this is as good a gloss as any on the opening acts of *King Lear*. When the play begins, Lear is doing just what Being does: seeking his own interests, maintaining his own existence, and assimilating the world unto himself. And Goneril and Regan, with an eye on their own enrichment, are willing to play along. Venally performing the obsequious parts to which they have been put, they offer flowery expressions of love, obscuring their otherness and presenting themselves as obedient extensions of Lear's self. Their hypocrisy enables the king's fantasies of self-sovereignty, and things move along smoothly enough. But with her bare "nothing" Cordelia brings to a crashing halt this inauthentic play of the same. As an answer to Lear's question, Cordelia's reply is irrecoverable, but its message is clear: that Cordelia cannot be comprehended within her father's totality. This eruption of alterity upends in an instant the power relations that Lear has used to structure his contest. After expending all of his political capital to make himself the center of attention, Lear finds himself supplanted by a daughter whose powerlessness comprises a more compelling claim to that place. Her vulnerability speaks more loudly than his majesty, obliging *him* to attend to *her*. And in that moment of attention, Lear knows himself to be a usurper and a murderer, wholly and completely responsible for the one before him.¹⁵ His ensuing rage is quite obviously an attempt to evade the awesome responsibility that

Cordelia has made him feel. As Sears Jayne remarks, Lear reacts with "that violence which characterizes the actions of people who are stung by the consciousness of their own guilt."¹⁶ Lear essays to bury his sense of responsibility beneath an all-consuming anger so as to persist on his egoistic path.

And persist he does, at least for a time. From one moment to the next, Lear disowns his daughter and leaves her without a dowry, as if he could relinquish his responsibility by renouncing his paternity. Yet even when Cordelia is stripped of her filial status, she continues to stand before her father in the primary ethical relation of the-one-before-the-other. Her upright and exposed face is a perpetual reproof, a vision so searing that Lear cannot stand to look upon it. "Hence, and avoid my sight!" he roars (1.1.122). To escape the obligation that otherness imposes upon him, Lear turns away from the upright face in which he has seen it:

Thou hast her, France. Let her be thine, for we
Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see
That face of hers again. (1.1.260-262)

Rather than heed Kent's call to "See better, Lear," the king forswears forever the sight of his youngest daughter (1.1.156). It is common for critics to parley these repeated references to sight into an overarching trope about eyesight and insight, but Paul Alpers is right to remind us that looking in this play is not about perception so much as connection. To look upon someone is to enter into relation with him or her. Thus, when Lear turns away from Cordelia what he rejects is not some abstract moral truth but "actual human relationships that give rise to moral obligations."¹⁷ The king does not want to look on his daughter because he perceives in her naked face a naked command.

This sequence of events sets the pattern for the play. Each time the king encounters alterity, he tries to ignore its summons, first by raging against the other and then by demanding that he or she be removed from his field of vision. When Kent, for example, presents himself as "the true blank of thine eye," Lear tries not to look, then orders Kent to absent himself ("Out of my sight!"), and finally banishes him under penalty of death (1.1.155-157). Later, when

Goneril and Regan cast off their false faces and reveal themselves as they really are, Lear again reacts with curses rather than care. He cannot countenance his daughters the second they stop pretending to be same-as-him. By this time, though, the king has surrendered his scepter and can no longer banish them as he has done Kent and Cordelia; consequently, he elects to exile himself. Rather than submit himself to the needs and desires of others, Lear forswears human society and takes to the heath, vainly seeking what Levinas terms "the salvation of a hermit."¹⁸ Before Lear will be for-the-other, he will try to be without-the-other, as if he could return—through sheer force of will—to an imaginary state prior to the arrival of the other and the claims she makes.

It is a fool's errand, destined to fail. Try as he might, Lear cannot escape his ordination. Everywhere he turns, he finds another face commanding him to sacrifice: there is Kent, the Fool, Poor Tom, Gloucester. The summons to be-otherwise works ceaselessly on Lear, such that he cannot escape his ordination, even if he will not altogether assume it. Pricked onward by his encounters with the other, Lear is pitched relentlessly forward, lurching (in spite of himself) towards transcendence—which, in this context, means towards Cordelia.

When Lear awakes in Cordelia's camp, it is clear that things are different. Suffused in soft music and gentle tones, the scene is unlike any other in the play. A change is evident in Lear as well, and not just in his fresh attire. Up till now, Lear has doggedly tried to force others to fit his own totality: Albion's answer to Procrustes, if you will. But now, with Cordelia presenting herself to him ("Sir, do you know me?") and inviting his gaze ("O look upon me, sir"), Lear stops trying to control the other and finally appears to enter into authentic relation (4.6.41, 50). Intent on the one before him, Lear attends to Cordelia's condition and puts himself entirely at her disposal, even if it means drinking poison.

LEAR: Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.

I know you do not love me; for your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

You have some cause; they have not.

CORDELIA: No cause, no cause. (4.6.64-67)

This exchange is not, strictly speaking, particularly poetic, but it is powerful nonetheless. This is because the significance of Lear's and Cordelia's lines, as Levinas would say, lies not in "the said" (*le dit*) but in "the saying" (*le dire*). The meaning of their words does not depend upon the semantic content they convey but upon the ethical approach they enact. For in this moment, Lear and Cordelia are not using signs so much as they are making themselves into signs, delivering themselves to one another in that discursive attitude of sustained exposure and incessant offer that Levinas calls "the very signifyingness of signification" (OB 5).

The end result is an interaction that feels intensely sacred, albeit in some indeterminate way. (A. C. Bradley is not the only one who finds this scene "almost a profanity to touch.")¹⁹ It must be noted, however, that the sanctity of this moment is not produced by the arrival of God but by the proximity to the other. In Shakespeare's play, as in Levinas's philosophy, transcendence is imagined, first and foremost, as an effect of interrelation, of ethics. It is no accident that Lear and Cordelia's tête-à-tête offers much more in the way of transcendence than any of the play's more recognizably "religious" gestures.

Assuredly, there is no shortage of religious gesturing in *Lear*. As Bradley notes, religious references in this play are "more frequent than is usual in Shakespeare's tragedies."²⁰ Characters are constantly apostrophizing the gods, yet these gods, as Knight observes, are "slightly vitalized" and "presented with no poetic conviction": "one feels them to be figments of the human mind rather than omnipotent ruling powers."²¹ Susan Snyder agrees, pointing out that the gods invoked in *Lear* exhibit "a close subjective relation" to the characters who invoke them. Characters who value kindness refer to the gods as kind, while characters who value justice refer to the gods as just.²² What we are presented with, Sean Lawrence explains, are not gods but idols, each fashioned in the image of its maker. Merely projections of personal needs, values, and aspirations, these idols are incapable of saving anyone—which is precisely the point. According to Lawrence, the play asserts the poverty of paganism by showing how its adherents end up worshiping their own creations as divine, thereby closing themselves off to that which is truly ulterior and making it impossible for them to exceed the narrow confines of their own totalities.²³

In advancing this argument, Lawrence draws to good effect on the Levinasian idea that true transcendence requires radical alterity. To show that such a concept would not have been foreign to an early modern author like Shakespeare, Lawrence compellingly compares the *deus absconditus* of early modern Christianity to the “asynchronous” God of Levinas’s philosophy, emphasizing how the transcendent qualities of each are closely associated with an eternal ineffability. This cross-historical comparison is a valuable contribution, demonstrating how early modern ideas on transcendence might resonate with some of Levinas’s. Yet it seems to me that Lawrence takes his historicizing too far when he concludes that Shakespeare would not have considered the characters of *Lear* capable of transcendence because they are not Christian. According to Lawrence, the pagan characters in this play do not have access to Christ’s revelation; consequently, the best Shakespeare can imagine for them is that they come to acknowledge the emptiness of their idols and embrace an atheism that will, in turn, prepare them for the arrival of a truly ulterior god—even if that god is not set to come for several centuries.

I am doubtful that the metaphysical possibilities of Shakespeare’s plays can be delimited as precisely or as orthodoxly as all this—not when so many of his “pagan” plays abound in Christian oaths, imagery, and allusions, and not when so many of his “pagan” characters undergo ecstatic experiences of one kind or another. In the latter category, one might think of Cleopatra (who feels “immortal longings”[AC 5.2.272]), Pericles (who hears the music of the spheres [P 2.1.214]) and Posthumus (who receives a visitation from Jupiter [CY 5.5.187-207]).²⁴ Examples such as these suggest that Shakespeare was not especially concerned about avoiding theological anachronism or upholding fine doctrinal distinctions, nor was he so stringent as to suppose that non-Christians were incapable of transcendence. This certainly does not seem to be the governing paradigm in *King Lear*, which takes place in a thoroughly pagan world yet repeatedly gestures beyond this world. As René Fortin points out, the tragedy contains far too many “signals of transcendence” to ignore.²⁵

Fortin borrows this phrase from Peter Berger, whose “inductive theology” he brings to bear on *King Lear*. According to Fortin, what makes Berger’s methodology particularly useful to the study

of Shakespearean tragedy is its phenomenological orientation. Inasmuch as it confines itself to phenomena that are found within natural reality but that point beyond that reality, inductive theology offers us the means to talk about the religious experience of the plays without compromising the integrity of the secular experience. These considerations are quite similar to the ones that have led me to Levinas. Indeed, it would seem that Levinas's ethical phenomenology qualifies as a species of inductive theology, inasmuch as it, too, can be described as "a thoroughly unbiased anthropology" that strives to discern "signals of transcendence within the empirically-given human situation."²⁶ However, if Levinas's philosophy constitutes a kind of inductive theology, it is a highly sophisticated version, capable of giving us unique insights into the uncommon complexities of *King Lear*.

Levinas, for instance, can help us put to rest Lawrence's questions about Christian revelation and pagan possibilities. He would do so by reiterating that the disclosure of the divine does not depend upon a miraculous incarnation because the ulterior God is always already manifest in the face of the other. The revelation of God, Levinas maintains, is not an historical event but an ethical one: namely, the encounter with the other. This encounter is the only epiphany we need, and it is the only one we can expect. It is not, however, a shallow substitute for a more meaningful encounter with God. As Levinas sees it, the face-to-face is the most profoundly religious experience we can have. In fact, Levinas believes that were it not for *autrui*, we could have no knowledge of divinity or theology: "There can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from relationship with men It is our relations with men . . . that give to theological concepts the sole significance they admit of Without the signification they draw from ethics, theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks" (TI 78-79). This is what Levinas means when he calls the other "the very locus of metaphysical truth" (TI 78), and when he alleges that "it is only in the infinite relation with the other that God passes (*se passe*), that traces of God are to be found."²⁷

I believe that the complex religiosity of *King Lear* is commensurate with this. In the dark world of *Lear*, as in the difficult philosophy of Levinas, piety does not come through communion with God, who remains inaccessible (either non-existent or *absconditas* or

"asynchronous"). Rather, it comes through communion with the other. Sanctity is a wholly human affair—but it is no less transcendent for all that. When Lear and Cordelia face one another in sincere submission, the horror and savagery of the play are temporarily pushed to the periphery and we are made to see something indefinably yet indisputably holy. As the king teeters on the brink of transcendence, he (and we) are given a glimpse of the infinite and are made to hear the word of God (EN 110, AT 104).²⁸

It is certainly the case that several of Shakespeare's plays climax in reunion scenes wherein characters who have been lost to each other once again enter into face-to-face relation. And it is also the case that these scenes of reunion, as staged by Shakespeare, take on sacred tones. When Lear looks on Cordelia, he sees a soul in bliss and is made to imagine a celestial world. When Pericles looks on Marina, he is cured of his disabling despair and is blessed to hear the music of the spheres. When Leontes looks on Hermione, he is prompted to awaken his faith and receives, in return, a resurrection. But if all these climactic moments verge on the holy, they do so in a very humanistic way. What brings Lear and Pericles and Leontes to the threshold of the sacred is not the intervention of a divine being but the (renewed) experience of an interpersonal relation. In each of these plays, the epiphanic event is not orientated around a metaphysical God but around a mortal being: the flesh and blood person before me. Like Levinas, Shakespeare seems to envision the ethical relation as the scene, the clearing, the horizon within which God is made manifest.²⁹ In this sense, we might even say that the theology of Shakespeare's late plays shades more toward the Jewish than the Christian. As Levinas explains, Christians yearn for a direct encounter with God, but Jews do not see this as possible or even necessary: "The direct encounter with God, *this* is a Christian concept. As Jews, we are always a threesome: I and you and the Third who is in our midst. And only as a Third does He reveal himself" (LR 247).

In making such claims, however, I do not wish to imply that Levinas is the master key to unlock all of Shakespeare, nor do I wish to reduce all of Shakespeare to a theatrical anticipation or expression of Levinas's philosophy. My aim is to propose that Shakespeare was every bit as interested in the transcendent possibilities

of the face-to-face encounter as was Levinas, and that this interest expressed itself similarly in the works of both writers: namely, in a pious discourse that locates the other in the trace of God and that envisions the ethical relation as “an optics of the divine.”³⁰ In *Lear*, as in Levinas, transcendence is not attained through ecstasy or apotheosis. Rather, it is achieved by attending to and responding to the one before us, the one who disincarnates the divine—not as a type or shadow—but as a non-thematizable summons that carries us “beyond being” by commanding us to be-otherwise. To answer this command, as *Lear* perhaps does in the end, is to be transformed utterly and to know that no relation to God can be more right or more immediate than our relation to the other.³¹

Notes

¹See Geoffrey L. Bickersteth, *The Golden World of “King Lear,”* Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy 32 (1946), 26; R. W. Chambers, *King Lear* (Glasgow, 1940), 49; and Edgar I. Fripp, *Shakespeare: Man and Artist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 655-657. Qtd in William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988), 3-4.

²Paul N. Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York: New York University, 1957), 185-186.

³For Elton’s refutation of the Christian reading, see his classic study, *King Lear and the Gods*, esp. ch. 11 (“Irony as Structure”), 329-334.

⁴All quotations of Shakespeare come from *The Norton Complete Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). In quoting *King Lear*, I generally refer to *The Tragedy of King Lear* (F). Quotations that only appear in *The History of King Lear* (Q) will be designated as “Q.”

⁵*The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, intro. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960).

⁶Richard Strier, “Shakespeare and the Skeptics,” *Religion and Literature* 32 (2000): 171-196, 185.

⁷Strier, “Shakespeare and the Skeptics,” 186.

⁸G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 230-232.

⁹For other readings of *King Lear* informed by Levinas, see Sean Lawrence, “The Difficulty of Dying in *King Lear*,” *English Studies in Canada* 31 (2005): 35-52; James Kearney, “‘This is above all strangeness’: *King Lear*, Ethics, and the Phenomenology of Recognition,” *Criticism* 54 (2012): 455-467; and Kent R. Lehnhof, “Relation and Responsibility: A Levinasian Reading of *King Lear*,” *Modern Philology* 111 (2014): 485-509.

¹⁰Qtd in Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

¹¹Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 23. Although Badiou intends this as an indictment of Levinas's philosophical authority, it gives Levinas a certain standing in the present study, since the phrase that Badiou applies to Levinas's philosophy seems a perfect fit for Shakespeare's tragedy. If we are to explore the inchoate theology of *King Lear*, who better to guide us than a philosopher of "decomposed religion"?

¹²See Levinas, *EI* 97, where he cites Abraham's reply to the summons of God, as recorded in Genesis 22:1 ("I am here").

¹³Cf. James Kearney's claim that "the play seems interested—in the Poor Tom scenes particularly—in dramatizing the experience of a particular phenomenon: the alterity, the sheer strangeness, of the other person." Kearney, "This Above All Is Strangeness," 465.

¹⁴See *EI* 52.

¹⁵"What is . . . a solitary individual," Levinas asks, "if not a growing tree without regard for all that it cuts off and destroys, absorbing the nourishment, the air and the sun, a being which is fully justified in its nature and its being? What is an individual if not a usurper? What does the advent of conscience mean . . . , if not the discovery of cadavers at my side and my horror of existing as a murderer?" Qtd in Adriaan T. Peperzak, "Judaism and Philosophy in Levinas," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 40 (1996): 125-145, 135.

¹⁶Sears Jayne, "Charity in *King Lear*," *SQ* 15 (1964): 277-288, 278.

¹⁷Paul J. Alpers, "King Lear and the Theory of the 'Sight Pattern,'" in *In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1962), 133-152, 135.

¹⁸Qtd in Peperzak, "Judaism and Philosophy in Levinas," 135.

¹⁹A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," and "Macbeth,"* 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1905), 285.

²⁰Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 203.

²¹Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, 212.

²²Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear* (Princeton University Press, 1979), 174.

²³Sean Lawrence, "'Gods That We Adore': The Divine in *King Lear*," *Renascence* 56 (2004), 143-159.

²⁴*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.272; *Pericles* 21.214; *Cymbeline* 5.5.187-207.

²⁵René E. Fortin, "Shakespearean Tragedy and the Problem of Transcendence," *Shakespeare Studies* 7 (1974): 307-325, 310.

²⁶Fortin, "Shakespearean Tragedy and the Problem of Transcendence," 310.

²⁷Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 31.

²⁸"In my relation to the other, I hear the Word of God. It is not a metaphor; it is not only extremely important, it is literally true. I'm not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God" (*EN* 110). "There is, in the face, the supreme authority that commands, and I always say it is the word of

God. The face is the locus of the word of God. There is the word of God in the other, a non-thematized word" (AT 104).

²⁹I adapt here the phrasing of Merold Westphal, who paraphrases Levinas as follows: "The point is that the ethical relation is the scene, the clearing, the only horizon within which the true God is truly revealed We might put it this way: the only horizon in which I can be truly open to the true God is the horizon in which all my horizons are relativized by the ethical claim of the Other." Merold Westphal, "Levinas's Teleological Suspension of the Religious," in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 151-60, 156.

³⁰Levinas, *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le Judaïsme* (Paris: A. Michel, 1976), 209. Qtd in Peperzak, "Judaism and Philosophy in Levinas," 135.

³¹According to Levinas: "Ethics is an optics of the divine. No relation to God is more right or more immediate. The Divine cannot manifest itself except through the neighbor." Levinas, *Difficile Liberté*, 209. Qtd in Peperzak, "Judaism and Philosophy in Levinas," 135-136.